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Honors Convocation: Ensuring Perception is Not Reality

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Honors convocation: Ensuring perception is not reality

On behalf of the board of trustees, our faculty and staff, it is my honor to congratulate you for your achievements at Augustana College. Honorees, we are proud of you. Augustana is a top tier national liberal arts college and you are among Augustana's finest.

And a word to parents. Your student did not become an honors student by accident. It was your students' hard work and determination to be sure, but it was even more than that. You, parents, gave your students the drive to pursue excellence. And this did not happen overnight. You were their role models, you believed in them and you took the time to demonstrate to your students how to stick with a task until it was completed well. For that, I join our students in thanking you.

Students, as the achievements we celebrate today indicate, you are likely to be tomorrow's leaders. Graduates of liberal arts colleges are nearly three times as likely to be CEOs of Fortune 500 corporations, but are also nearly three times as likely to be Peace Corp volunteers. And they are six times as likely to become a leading scientist.

As leaders, you will be entering into a very different world than your parents and I entered into. Because of technology and globalization, the world will change far faster than at any time in our history. And, I regret to say, you are entering a world that is more polarized than ever. The political parties talk past each other, not with each other. Cable news programs scream at you, with little emphasis on educating you. Instead of confronting difficult ideas, we ignore the idea and confront its source. *Ad hominem* attacks, attacking motives, not rebutting ideas and ideological brinksmanship seem to be the order of the day, pushing out civil and respectful discourse.

Our polarized world needs — now more than ever — the skills you bring to it: the power of critical and creative thinking.

One the biggest threats to true critical thinking is the view that "perception is reality." It is a dominant view in today's society and, I think, it is a root cause of the lack of engaging discourse. If we perceive it, it must be so. If I perceive you to be wrong on one issue, you must be wrong on all issues. I Googled the phrase "perception is reality" and there were almost 2.4 million hits. But when you Google the more accurate phrase "perception is not reality" there were a mere 35,000 hits.

Is perception reality? Of course not. Centuries ago, we perceived the world to be flat, and so it had to be. Ten years ago, our government perceived that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq because Saddam Hussein was a bad guy, when there were not. A significant minority of Americans perceive that President Obama was not born in the United States, even though that is not true. We see conclusions based on false perceptions every day. She is a conservative, so she must not believe in civil rights. He is a liberal, so he must not believe in individual responsibility. He is poor, so he must not have any ambition. She is a business person, so she must care only about money. I perceive you to be wrong on an issue that I am passionate about, so you

must be an unworthy person.

To think that perception is reality is one of the worst logical fallacies. For those of you who read Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, you know the difficulties of perceiving reality. Perceptions sometimes create a world of illusions. We need work to come into the light of context and comprehension in order to fully understand that our initial perceptions are sometimes not reality.

How do we avoid this trap of inaccurate perception? Let me offer several suggestions:

First, invest in the hard work of using your critical thinking skills. Be a skeptic about what you hear. Aristotle said "It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it." For many of you, your abilities to challenge assumptions, put values to the test, and question facts not-in-evidence, have made you the honors students you are today. You know how to question whether the facts **are** as they **appear**. More simply put, you know not to judge a book by its cover. Use your skills to ask the difficult questions to move from the world of illusion to the world of truth.

Second, engage in face-to-face conversations. If you disagree with someone, sometimes disagreement is based on your perceptions of how they feel or your assumptions about what motivated their decisions. So often, even at Augustana, we disagree with what we perceive others to be thinking as a short-cut to having honest face-to-face conversations. To really test whether our perceptions about someone are true, why not have a face-to-face conversation? You might even make a new friend in doing so.

Third, be introspective and willing to be self-critical. On occasion I see highly educated people who are so sure of their intelligence and educational pedigree that they lose the ability to evaluate critically their own thinking. Part of being truly educated is continuing to learn — continuing to ask whether your perceptions are really valid. And the cornerstone of maturity is to appreciate what John Lennon meant when he said, "the more I see, the less I know for sure."

Finally, to test reality, put yourself in the shoes of others. C.S. Lewis wrote in *The Magician's Nephew*: "What you see and what you hear depends a great deal on where you are standing." I take that to mean that in order to test our perceptions, we must try to stand in the shoes of others. When we look at problems, it's invaluable to stand in the shoes of someone from a different part of the world, from a different economic or religious background, or someone who just disagrees with you.

So students, understanding that perception is not reality is, in part, what has made you honor students. Remember this as you go out into the world. Ask the difficult question. Be a skeptic. Don't be afraid to engage in face-to-face conversations with those who disagree with you. Learning to be self critical and walk in the shoes of others, so that you grow. I have every confidence you will; and when you do, you will indeed be tomorrow's leaders. Thank you.

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Classics	Environmental Studies	Science	Pre-Medicine	Sociology (Social Welfare)
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